

## Red Harvest: the Communist Party and American Farmers

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## Book Reviews

combines were built for the custom combiner. Their capacity and their mobility were greatly increased, and their increased cost made their use for custom work more and more essential to their owners.

Professor Isern tells his readers much about the custom combining that developed. He deals with such topics as the number of combiners originating in different states and the number of combiners that moved from one state to another in the harvest. He also deals with the lives of the combiners, the equipment used, the hours worked, the living facilities for combine crews, the patterns of movement northward, and how these and other factors have changed. He points out that custom combining frequently becomes a way of life and a traditional business and that many families are now in the second and third generations of the business.

The book is illustrated with many well chosen photographs. Information is also presented with graphs on a variety of topics such as numbers of combines, geographical origin of combine operators, area harvested, number of bushels harvested, value of crops, and price charged for combining. Some topics on which a reader might expect to find information are omitted, such as changes that custom combining has caused in size of farms, amount of wheat planted, impact on farm families, changes in labor supply utilized by wheat farmers. This is a book about the custom combiners and their lives, not one about the people for whom they work.

It is a first-class study, interesting, well organized, and informative. It should be of great interest to inhabitants of the Plains where custom combining outfits have become a dominant part of the harvest season. It should also attract an audience among historians and other observers of the American scene.

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W. D. AESCHBACHER

*Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers*, by Lowell K. Dyson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. pp. xii, 259. Bibliographic essay. \$18.95.

The countryside, and the people who lived there, held little interest for Karl Marx. He complained of the "idiocy of rural life" and regarded European peasants as likely recruits for the counter-revolution. But the workers' revolution to which Marx devoted his life never showed up. And when Marxists finally came to power in Russia and Asia in the twentieth century, they did so as the leaders of peasant revolu-

## THE ANNALS OF IOWA

tions. (The Bolshevik revolution in Russia began in the cities in 1917, but its outcome was decided in the countryside in the civil war of 1918 to 1920.) The character of the Communist movement was shaped to a significant degree by the conflict between the urban, industrial, and modernizing outlook of Communist leaders, and the traditional agricultural nature of the societies they sought to lead.

Communist efforts to make and consolidate revolutions in the countryside in Russia and Asia have been analyzed exhaustively. Lowell Dyson's *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* is the first serious attempt to examine the history of the Communist party's rural strategy in the United States. It is likely to remain the standard reference work on this topic. American Communism was, of course, an urban-centered movement, and few of its adherents had much knowledge of life outside the city. (There is a famous anecdote about a Communist speaker at a meeting in the early 1920s who began his address with the salutation "Workers and Peasants of Brooklyn.") But beginning in the 1920s the Communists made determined, if sporadic, efforts to extend their influence past city limits. They did so, first, because the Russians told them to: "Have you no farmers in America?" Lenin asked pointedly in a letter to American Communist leaders. And second, they did so because there was a long tradition of rural radicalism in the American South and Midwest that they believed was their rightful inheritance. As Theodore Draper noted in *The Roots of American Communism*, many early Communist leaders were influenced as much by Populist ideas as they were by socialist doctrine in their formative years: Earl Browder was the son of a Kansas Populist, and William Z. Foster entitled his autobiography *From Bryan to Stalin*.

The most interesting chapter in *Red Harvest* describes the Communist efforts to build a cooperative movement in midwestern Finnish communities. Radicalism had deep roots in the Finnish-American community. Many Finnish immigrants had taken part in struggles against the Russian Czarist regime; the Socialist party and the Industrial Workers of the World had enjoyed strong support among Finnish-Americans before the first World War, and the Communists inherited much of that support. In the 1920s the Cooperative Central Exchange (CCE), most of whose members were Finnish farmers, was the largest cooperative in operation in the United States. In 1929, Dyson notes, "every leader of importance in the CCE was a member of the Communist Party" (p. 51). The cooperative movement was more than a source of cheap goods; in small farming and mining towns it was often the center of the community's social and cultural life. Here,

## Book Reviews

for once, American Communists might have played the role that Mao prescribed for his own followers in China, to be fish swimming in the sea of popular support. Instead, as Dyson shows, the Communists proceeded to drain the sea, using the cooperatives as a source of funds for what they regarded as more important work in the cities. By the early 1930s the Communists had split the cooperative movement and squandered much of their popular support. The Cooperative Central Exchange, Dyson comments dryly, stopped printing the hammer and sickle on its canned goods.

We need to know more about the lives and ideas of these Finnish-American farmers. What role did radicalism play in their lives? How did it hinder or help their eventual "Americanization"? What was it like on those cold Wisconsin winter nights, sitting around the pot-bellied stove in the cooperative store, talking politics and crops, dreaming about warm summer days in a better world? And who were those farmers out in Sheridan County, Montana, briefly mentioned in *Red Harvest*, who read the *Daily Worker* in the barber shop and elected Communists to county government? *Red Harvest* has broken the ground. Now let's see what seeds are sown.

SMITH COLLEGE

MAURICE ISSERMAN

*The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West*, by Wayne E. Fuller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. pp. ix, 302. Photographs, notes, index. \$22.50.

The one-room country school was a ubiquitous feature of American education for more than two centuries. Although few remain in operation, it is still easy to find people who began their school careers in one. Despite this remarkable fact, specialists in the history of American culture have largely ignored the phenomenon. Because of this dearth of treatment, Fuller's book is particularly timely.

The author seeks to describe "origins and operations of the one-room schools, the rise of professional educators, and the long conflict between them and the farmers over the adequacy of their schools." Additionally, the book "is intended to be a social history of Midwestern rural America, seen through the development of one of its most important institutions." Certainly, Fuller has set for himself a challenging task. As a first effort in a field long overdue scholarly attention, this book suggests some potentially interesting lines of investigation. Tracing the origins and development of the one-room

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